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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the cultural attitudes which one either learns or inherits as a speaker of English. It is a discussion of the attitudes observed as a student of English, in the use of English as an international and auxiliary language, and in the teaching of English as a second language. As English becomes an international language, condescending attitudes can be very clearly observed in international conferences where English is the medium of communication. Those who gain admittance to the conference only through their native ability to speak the international language, but who have not as yet developed an international "mind" or "personality," become very obvious through their ethnocentric, monolingual, and monocultural attitudes. This paper attempts to demonstrate to educators that the attitudes that are developed as one learns English are just as important as learning the language itself. The psychological and cultural aspects of learning English as an international auxiliary language are stressed. (Author/NCR)

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ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE:

AN ATTITUDINAL APPROACH

Gregory Trifonovitch

Cultural attitudes are manifested in many ways, but one of the most prominent means is through language communication. As English assumes the role of an international auxiliary language, it is important to look at the attitudes which are transmitted by its speakers, whether they be native speakers or non-native ones, and to become aware of the dangers of some attitudes which prevail. Those involved in teaching the language need to become cognizant of its new international role and of the attitudes which develop around English. In my exploration of these attitudes, I shall draw heavily on my own personal experience in learning English (as a seventh language), in using it as an interna ional and auxiliary language, and in teaching it as a second language.

I firmly believe that English has reached the status of being accepted as an international auxiliary language. People long predicted this, including Fukuzawa Yukichi, who said in 1859, "...As certain as day, English was to be the most useful language of the future..." I am quite sure that no one here would challenge the fact that most cosmopolitan conferences that deal with international problems and concerns use English as the medium of communication. And I also firmly believe that the problems which have been reported as reasons for misunderstanding in many of these kinds of conferences, such as

dialectical variations, phonological problems and other linguistic difficulties, are not as serious as they are often made out to be. Basically, these are only surface manifestations of deeper issues which cause misunderstanding, namely, cultural and psychological attitudes which we have carried over into English as it has gradually evolved into an international language.

Faulty attitudes and beliefs grew out of earlier colonial years when non-English speaking countries, wanting to identify themselves with prominent English-speaking Western countries, sought to acquire English as a foreign language and used the native speaker's English as the model to be achieved. Many of these attitudes are unconsciously being carried over into English in its new role as an international auxiliary language.

While English is an international auxiliary language, unfortunately, most of its speakers are not international persons. Let me illustrate this by an example which I draw from a conference that I recently attended. The conference included participants from Asia, Southeast Asia, the Pacific and the United States. It was very clearly evident that papers presented by native speakers of English were easily and readily accepted by the conferees. However, papers which were presented by educated non-native speakers of English were not categorized in the same area of acceptability as the native English speakers' papers. This issue came to a climax when a conferee from Japan presented her paper in educated Japanese-English. After the paper was presented,

there were two comments made by Native speakers of English which were completely irrelevant to the basic thesis and topic presented. These were immediately followed by two other native speakers of English who came to the rescue of the Japanese conferee by paraphrasing and explaining to the rest of the conferees the intent of the subject of the paper she presented. On the surface, this seemed to be a normal attitude for the native speakers to take and indicated an interest in illucidating in better English the paper as it was presented in non-native English. However, the reaction infuriated a conferee from Korea who immediately took the floor in a very dramatic gesture, hit the table with his fist, and exclaimed, "We will no longer tolerate this kind of attitude! Ladies and Gentlemen, we clearly and fully understand what our colleague from Japan had to say. It was absolutely insulting when two of you made comments which were completely irrelevant to the topic of the paper. It clearly indicates to me that because our colleague spoke with a Japanese accent that immediately you thought the paper was not worthy of your attention. And then the other two gentlemen, with their condescending attitude, were trying to paraphrase for us the intent of our colleague's paper. Ladies and Gentlemen, this is an international conference. It is about time that we lay down our linguistic chauvinism and restore it with some cross-cultural tolerance." This was my first encounter of a public denunciation of biased attitudes towards non-native English speakers. I have been at other conferences where this issue has come up, but always in private conversations rather than in the

conference itself.

I began to learn my English about a quarter of a century ago, just as it was undergoing the transitional period into its present international form. As I was learning the language I was constantly reminded, in good faith, by the native speakers of English that I was a trespasser in their territory. I was always made conscious of my accent, my mis-pronunciation, my grammar or lack of it, my limited range of vocabulary, and most of all, my inability to "think" in English. Thus, I became very much aware that I was a foreigner, an intruder into another domain, and slowly an attitude of inferiority began to develop. I realized that I would not be able to achieve the native level of English and thus had to accept the reality that as long as I use English for communication I will always be considered an outsider. My feelings paralleled those of Mohandas Gandhi, who wrote of his experience, "...But as the days passed, I became fidgety. I felt shy even in speaking to the steward. I was quite unaccustomed to talking English, and except for Sjt. Mazmudar all the other passengers in the second saloon were English. I could not speak to them. For I could rarely follow their remarks when they came up to speak to me, and even when I understood I could not reply. I had to frame every sentence in my mind, before I could bring it out..."[2]

Just as this feeling of inferiority exists among most of us who have learned English as a second or a foreign language, I have observed that it also exists among native speakers of English who speak with a

dialect that is considered to be inferior by other native speakers. I have noticed how speakers of American English with a southern accent have reacted when they are in the company of those who speak northern English, and how many of them have deliberately tried to change their accent. If they succeed, they are proud of the fact that they were able to lose the undesirable accent. In fact, they try not to be detected by others as those who have come from the South. Another example is native speakers of American English who become very much conscious of their language as they speak to native British speakers of English.

When one discovers the need to learn another language in order to communicate, he is automatically placed in a disadvantageous position, and an attitude of inadequacy begins to grow. I have constantly noticed that non-native speakers of English apologize for their inability to speak English correctly, make excuses for their poor English, and ask for the native English speaker's indulgence and forgiveness. Others have been more subtle in making these excuses, such as in my case. Since I am Caucasian and an American, it is expected that I will speak English as a native American speaker. However, those who listen to me for the first time are immediately drawn to my accent or my way of speaking. As a result, their attention is mostly on my style, rather than on the subject which I am trying to communicate. Consequently, I have usually made it a point, before beginning any conversation with new acquaintances or before making any public addresses, to indirectly

announce that I am not a native speaker of English, therefore, setting the stage as early as possible for effective communication.

Another attitude which I have encountered by native speakers of English is one from those speakers who have been in contact with foreigners or have traveled to other countries and supposedly have developed a "cross-cultural sophistication." Their attitude is the overly condescending one. It was exhibited to me when I was politely asked to repeat what I had just said, or by speaking to me very slowly and distinctly or by actually tutoring and assisting me with my sentence structure and pronunciation. Usually, this attitude was manifested in a conversation such as this, "Greg, please don't misunderstand me... I fully understand you. However, so that you will not be misunderstood by others, since many of them have not been in contact with people from other countires, let me help you with your pronunciation." And then the lesson began with a model for me. I would repeat after them, but unfortunately, after several attempts, they would give up by saying, "Don't worry about your accent. In fact, it's rather charming to be able to speak English with a foreign accent." This type of attitude always made me conscious of the medium rather than the message. My concentration was on speaking rather than on communicating.

I encountered the reverse of this last attitude by those who spoke English as an auxiliary language in their country. They usually exhibited their superior attitude not by condescending or tutoring me, but by

becoming very verbose and eloquent in their conversation as a demonstration of their status in the English-speaking hierarchy. Another version of this attitude is exhibited by the non-native speakers of English when they come to Hawaii and make excuses that it is very difficult for them to understand Hawaiian-English or Filipino-English or Chinese or Japanese-English as spoken in Hawaii. The idea is given that their English is more closely affiliated with the native Caucasian speakers of English, and as a result, it is very difficult for them to understand those who are not in the domain of the English-speaking world. This, of course, is a false identification with native speakers which causes them to block out non-native speakers.

In fact, this attitude of blocking out the understanding of English that does not come from a Caucasian or a white face seems to be very common by the native as well as the non-native speakers of English. A local acquaintance of ours of Chinese ancestry was in Texas undergoing medical treatment. He tells of an encounter while he was in the elevator in one of the hospitals, where he was asked by a Caucasian where he came from. He replied that he was from Hawaii. Small conversation ensued, and finally the Caucasian asked our Chinese friend how he had learned to speak English so well. He answered, "Oh, on the plane over from Hawaii. It's really a very easy language to learn! "

Another story was told to me by a Japanese friend from Hawaii who was traveling from Los Angeles to New York and who was conversing with

a mainlander sitting next to him. After about a half hour of conversation, the Caucasian asked him if he knew how to speak English! The language coming from a non-English face cannot be English!

Attitudes of superiority and inferiority developed very naturally as one group of people realized the need for learning another language, and the other group realized that since others were clamoring to learn their language, there was no need for them to learn any other language. However, as this attitude of superiority and inferiority grew, many speakers of English began to indirectly equate their ability and the degrees of speaking English to levels of intelligence. I have encountered several American teachers in Micronesia who were teaching English as a second language and who reported to me that they had no difficulty in teaching English in Micronesia since they had already had adequate training in special education and had had several years of experience in teaching the mentally handicapped. On the other hand, the Micronesian teachers of English were constantly self-deprecating themselves as bad teachers of English and as poor models.

Now these attitudes which have been developed as English was learned in order to be able to communicate with those from English speaking countries are the same attitudes which are being transferred to English as an international auxiliary language and as it is being used to communicate in our global community. We must become aware of "linguacentric" attitudes, where one group believes that they are the standard native speakers of English where all others are trying to emulate that particular

style, or the prejudiced attitude that good English comes from those with Caucasian features, which is actually prevalent among native as well as non-native speakers. It is the stereotyping attitude: "I really can't understand him. I know he was educated at Harvard, but he happens to come from such and such a country, and it's very difficult for me to understand him."

As educators in the field of English as an international auxiliary language, we have some responsibilities:

1) Since through the medium of English we will be coming into contact with a variety of cultures, it is no longer possible for us to concentrate on the cultures of the English-speaking world as was the custom in the past. Instead it is very important for us to develop an awareness of the other cultures and, at the same time, develop a basic cognitive awareness of our own culture. It is so easy to learn another culture and be completely oblivious to our own culture and values. I think it is the responsibility of every person who is learning English for international communication to also develop an understanding of his own culture and to begin developing a sensitivity and awareness toward understanding other cultures, at least to understand the other person's cultural point of view. Curricula in this area is lacking at the present time and hopefully at the East-West Center, in our Transcultural-Transnational Education Project, we will begin, with the assistance of other countries involved, to develop basic guides and materials in this area.

2) It is very important for those who are learning English for international purposes to become somewhat aware of as many languages as possible by simply listening to other languages and becoming able to identify one language from another. This is an important exercise before learning to accept the different varieties of English.

3) In addition to students being exposed to the model of English presented by their teacher, it is also very important for them to listen to as many varieties of English as possible to sharpen their linguistic frequency.

4) It is important for social scientists and pedagogues to cooperate and to make their findings and their curricula more appropriate. It is also imperative to be able to detect and accept various cultural styles of speaking English and to notice different styles of written English as they exhibit the cultural background of the speaker or the writer.

5) We must develop exams for English as an international auxiliary language and not to continue to rely only on exams that have been developed by English speaking countries.

In conclusion, my whole aim has been to stress the psychological and cultural aspects of learning English as an international auxiliary language. We must cease the overemphasis on linguistic factors. It is extremely important for non-native speakers of English to abandon their inferiority complex and to realize that English now belongs to the world and not to an elite group only. Their variety and style is just as acceptable

as any other styles of English. And the native speakers of English must slowly begin to replace their linguistic chauvinism with an attitude of linguistic tolerance. Complete understanding between users of English as an international auxiliary language will never be achieved. However, it is our responsibility to develop a tolerance for misunderstanding and acceptance. Possibly a linguistic tolerance could be one of our easiest first steps. Hopefully, we may soon refer to "...English, a language used by the world rather than on the world."[3]

FOOTNOTES

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2. Mohandas K. Gandhi, An Autobiography, Beacon Press, Boston, 1957, P. 42.

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